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12 December 1972

PLEASE RELAY THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE TO DR. KISSINGER FOR  
HIS EYES ONLY

1. At your request relayed by General Haig, I have taken a careful look at President Thieu's 12 December National Assembly speech and endeavored to assess what this speech does to Thieu's own ability to accept an agreement negotiated by you with Le Duc Tho; i.e., to what extent do Thieu's 12 December remarks paint him into a corner or constrict his latitude for subsequent political action. The short answer to your question is that, to my eye at least, Thieu has employed a lot of rhetoric, some of it quite artful, for a variety of diverse purposes, but he has carefully and deliberately avoided boxing himself in. He has left himself free to do whatever he wants to do or feels he has to do -- and the 12 December speech (in tandem with the past few weeks' covert reporting) sheds a fair bit of light on how Thieu views the opportunities, requirements and constraints inherent in the current situation.

2. The speech is vintage Thieu and very Vietnamese. The major themes are interwoven, repeated with variations in different contexts, and sometimes conveyed by elliptical allusion more than direct statement. The nature and purposes of the speech make it hard to "summarize," i.e., reduce to the matrix of a tidy (western) logical structure stated succinctly in English prose. In this speech, Thieu is trying to do several things, including:

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a. Explain what the Communists are "really" up to, i.e., put the onus for current difficulties squarely on Hanoi -- which is where Thieu honestly thinks it properly belongs.

b. Justify the GVN's position, explaining its reasonableness and indeed its essentiality if the GVN is to protect the vital interests of South Vietnam's "seventeen and one half million people."

c. Avoid offending the Americans or, particularly, opening a breach between the U.S. and the GVN (which Thieu knows Hanoi wants very much to open), but at the same time explain why, and how, the Americans are prone to misperceive the true realities of the Vietnam situation and how these misperceptions generate dangerous potentialities or pressures for disastrous actions.

d. Defuse the charge that the GVN -- i.e., Thieu -- is a major (even the major) obstacle to peace by offering "concrete" proposals demonstrating the GVN's flexibility, reasonableness and good will -- i.e., the Christmas to New Year's truce (a deliberately vague phrase that could be retroactively construed as meaning Christmas to Tet),

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the unilateral release of North Vietnamese POWs (to be sent back to North Vietnam), and the offer to sit down and discuss political problems with the NLF and the DRV (i.e., without you).

3. I would respectfully suggest that you take the time to read the whole speech carefully, line by line (FBIS 02 of 12 December has the full text). My additional comments below presume a basic familiarity with Thieu's text.

4. This speech is part and parcel (an important one) of Thieu's continuing effort to do several things we have discussed before, an effort that inevitably entails a simultaneous play to several different galleries. First and foremost, Thieu is trying to protect what he conceives as South Vietnam's vital interests. (Since he thinks of himself symbolically as the custodian of these interests and practically as the only leader really capable of pursuing them, the twin concepts of South Vietnam's vital interests and Thieu's vital interests inevitably get intermingled.) Let me return to this point in a moment since, in the final analysis, Thieu's weighing of net interest will play a predominant role in his actions with respect to any settlement agreement you negotiate.

5. Secondly, he is trying to improve his image (and, in the process, his political position) within South Vietnam. This gets tricky because

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it involves showing that he is (1) a genuine, independent nationalist who is not a U.S. puppet in any way, (2) capable of protecting the South Vietnamese people, i.e., of providing the leadership that will make it possible for them to resist the Communists (under whose rule the vast majority of the population does not want to live), and (3) not a personal obstacle to peace, which the majority of the South Vietnamese people clearly, and increasingly, desire.

6. In the process of doing the above, Thieu has to prepare the Vietnamese people for the psychological shock of peace, or at least a markedly different form of struggle. His limitations (from our perspective) may be obvious and irritating, but they should not blind us to the fact that Thieu is a shrewd and pragmatic Vietnamese politician with a brilliant grasp and understanding of his countrymen's psychology. He is convinced his people cannot be rushed into a new situation, they must have a chance to talk about it, thrash it about and, in the process, get used to the prospect of a changed environment. (Thieu's conviction here is of course compounded by the fact that he personally does not rush, and resists being rushed, into anything.) Trial balloons have to be floated. Straw men have to be erected so credit can be gained for beating them down. Fears have to be voiced and tangible steps taken to demonstrate that they

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have been duly considered and their grounds allayed. The heretofore unmentionable must transmute into a commonplace cliché. All of this takes time. Progress in this area is circular, not linear, and often hard for the foreign eye to discern.

7. Finally, Thieu has to consider South Vietnam's powerful patron, without whose continuing support no anti- or non-Communist South Vietnamese state can survive. A pragmatic realist, Thieu knows this, but here three other considerations affect his perception and are capable of distorting it.

a. At the risk of being rude, I must here be brutally frank. Thieu does not like you nor does he trust you. He is convinced that you are much more interested in getting a piece of paper signed amid fanfare and panoply than in protecting what he considers South Vietnam's legitimate vital interests. Though appearances may indicate otherwise, there is really nothing personal in Thieu's attitude. He sees you as a symbol, not an individual, and you have become what T.S. Eliot would have called an "objective correlative" for many of Thieu's emotions about the United States. As you know, the Vietnamese have an ingrained penchant for explaining situations or developments in terms of personalized

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conspiracy theories -- the more complex, the better. Thieu may not totally accept but is nonetheless obviously taken with the (to us) fetched theory that there is or at least may be a Soviet-U.S. deal afoot to establish a Vietnamese buffer against Chinese expansion and, further, that Washington and Moscow have mistakenly decided that China can be better contained by a unified Vietnam under Communist rule -- ergo South Vietnam is in danger of being sold down the river. He alludes to this "parenthetically" (his word) in his speech, and I am sure you are the "theorist" he has in mind.

b. Thieu has another conviction about the U.S. to which he also makes clear reference in his speech, though in language that tries to be considerably delicate. He believes (along with many South Vietnamese) that our understandable concern -- laudable from a humanitarian point of view -- for "several hundred" prisoners has distorted our perception or appreciation of Vietnamese reality and made us vulnerable to Hanoi's "cunning and crafty trick" of extracting major military and political concessions from us in return for these prisoners, and little else.

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c. Thieu tends to be a creature of habit with an instinctive inclination to employ tactics that have worked before and helped him overcome previous difficulties or problems. Throughout his Vietnamese political life and in his post-1967 dealings with the Americans, Thieu has frequently achieved his objectives through the exercise of stubborn patience, i.e., by stonewalling. This gambit has served him well in relatively minor matters (e.g., keeping Truong Dinh Dzu and Tran Ngoc Chou in prison), in far from minor matters (e.g., the one candidate 1971 election) and in matters of clearly vital importance (e.g., October 1968). This tactic becomes irresistible in a critical situation such as the current process of negotiating with Hanoi in which Thieu thinks (as he manifestly does) that his American allies need their spines stiffened in their interests as well as his. Thieu undoubtedly feels that his foot-dragging on the October 1972 draft agreement has produced (indirectly) additional concessions from Hanoi and thus not only helped protect South Vietnamese interests but also

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given the Americans more than they would have (rashly) been willing to settle for two months ago. One difficulty here, however, is that whether Thieu realizes it or not (and he probably does not), his understanding of the American temperament and our political dynamics is far from equal to his grasp of Vietnamese psychology and political reality. Thus Thieu almost certainly fails to appreciate the full measure of risk in his brinksmanship vis-a-vis the U.S. and the attendant dangers of his making a major, possibly fatal, miscalculation of what the traffic will bear.

8. Behind Thieu's 12 December speech lie all of the factors and considerations outlined above. Despite the superficial impression some of its language may convey (and not by accident), I think the speech reflects a very careful and deliberate effort on Thieu's part not to paint himself into a corner. We know from other reporting from sensitive and reliable sources that Thieu considers some form of settlement agreement inevitable. He also knows that at some point he will have to agree to sign, or at least he recognizes the risks that would be entailed in the inevitable impact on U.S. support of his continued intransigence beyond a certain point. The real question, is "where does Thieu place

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that point?" The answer is that he places it where he (not we) thinks the risks of continued refusal outweigh the risks of signing.

9. Sifting Thieu's language to distinguish what he privately considers rhetoric as opposed to essential substance is not easy. My own assessment is as follows:

a. I think Thieu is quite cynical about the benefits or protection any supervisory or international inspection mechanism is likely to provide. Consequently, while he will push for the best (i.e., most comprehensive and least fettered) structure obtainable, this is not a vital issue.

b. Much (though not all) of the fuss about "coalition" is probably rhetoric, advanced to stir South Vietnamese thinking, as a bluff, and as a straw man. I think Thieu was shocked to see the Vietnamese term employed for "administrative structure" in the October draft and saw in it confirmation of his suspicions regarding American naivete or unseemly (hence sloppy) haste. If "hanh chinh" is used, however, I think Thieu can probably live even with the language of the October draft, or at least believe that this need not be a crunch issue.

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c. I think Thieu is much more privately pragmatic than he publicly lets on with respect to the issue of NVA troops in South Vietnam. For understandable reasons, Thieu wants as many of them out as he can possibly get out, particularly since he knows how dependent his indigenous adversaries are on the support of a nearby NVA presence. Thieu, however, is a realist. He knows the North Vietnamese are unlikely to admit publicly that they have NVA units in South Vietnam and even less likely to sign any written promise to remove them. In the final analysis I think Thieu would settle for a private, unwritten side deal on this issue. His offer in the 12 December speech to match NVA withdrawal with ARVN demobilization in fact lays the groundwork for just such a deal (almost certainly by design). Again I apologize for rude frankness, but while Thieu may not trust you, he does trust President Nixon. In the crunch, he will probably be willing to accept a Presidential assurance of continued U.S. support and U.S. military protection (if the settlement's provisions are violated) and settle for a side deal on NVA troops that the President promises to make stick.

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d. The simultaneous cease-fire (i.e., Laos and Cambodia along with South Vietnam) argument also strikes me as more of a throw away issue than one of absolutely vital importance. Making the Communists freeze -- or at least commit themselves to freezing -- throughout Indochina would be useful, but this is not (I think) a matter over which Thieu would be prepared to jeopardize his future relations with the United States.

e. There is, however, one issue over which I am quite sure Thieu will not compromise and, indeed, being who he is and what he is, cannot compromise -- psychologically or politically. There is a deeply rooted aspect of all Asian cultures, including the Vietnamese, that imposes a limit on Asian pragmatism: form can be conceptually distinguished from substance only up to a certain point. Beyond that point, form becomes substance, and any attempt to distinguish between them becomes meaningless in the sense of being (literally) incomprehensible or unthinkable. Thieu would be personally and politically destroyed if he were to sign an agreement that eliminated the GVN's legal right to

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existence, and he would have the greatest difficulty (real, nor just rhetorical) in signing any agreement that did not specifically endorse and sanction that right. In Thieu's eyes, probably the most important sentence in his whole 12 December speech is the one that reads:

"As for the Communists, they seek to elude, or refuse to accept this important basis: South Vietnam and North Vietnam are two separate zones which must be temporarily considered as two separate states among the four Indochinese states."

10. Predicting the behavior of a political leader of another country of a different culture more than 10,000 miles distant is a chancy business, particularly in a complex situation where the stakes are high and the emotional stresses correspondingly strong. Thieu knows he is engaging in brinksmanship and I think he knows he is close to the brink (though I am not sure he knows how close). He certainly knows South Vietnam has little chance of surviving without continued U.S. support and assistance. My guess, however, is that he honestly believes that neither South Vietnam nor he would have any chance of surviving politically if he were to sign

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away its legal right to separate existence and simultaneously accept what the Communists have always insisted was the "correct" conceptual depiction of the Indochina struggle. On that issue, therefore, I think Thieu will stick, insisting that -- as a rock bottom minimum -- no agreement offered for his concurrence contain any reference to the "three states of Indochina" or any unamplified, unqualified reference to the 17th Parallel's being only a truce line and not (even temporarily) an international boundary.

11. If Thieu gets the minimal satisfaction I am sure he feels he has to have on this point -- which to him is unavoidably central -- I think he is probably privately ready to be flexible and at least grudgingly accommodating on almost everything else. He will, of course, balk if the theatrical mechanics of formalizing any settlement make him look like a puppet whose impatient master finally jerked the string. He will probably insist on the outward formality of a high level U.S. visitation to Saigon bringing him the "final text" for ostensible review prior to his public endorsement. Given this piece of international stage business (or some variant thereof) -- and given minimal satisfaction on the central juridical issue -- I think he is ready to come along. I also think a careful reading of his 12 December speech supports this conclusion. Some of its rhetoric

is artfully designed to mask what Thieu is really prepared to accept, but with equal artifice, it puts him on no limbs -- save the central one -- from which he cannot descend gracefully as a magnanimous questor for peace.

Warm regards,

George A. Carver, Jr.

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